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Whitney Museum of American Art,
Fairfield County

Karl Wirsum. *Hairy Armpits*. 1963

CHICAGO loop

IMAGIST ART 1949–1979

September 15–December 6, 2000

This brochure accompanies the exhibition "Chicago Loop: Imagist Art 1949–1979," organized by Cynthia Roznoy, branch curator, Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County.

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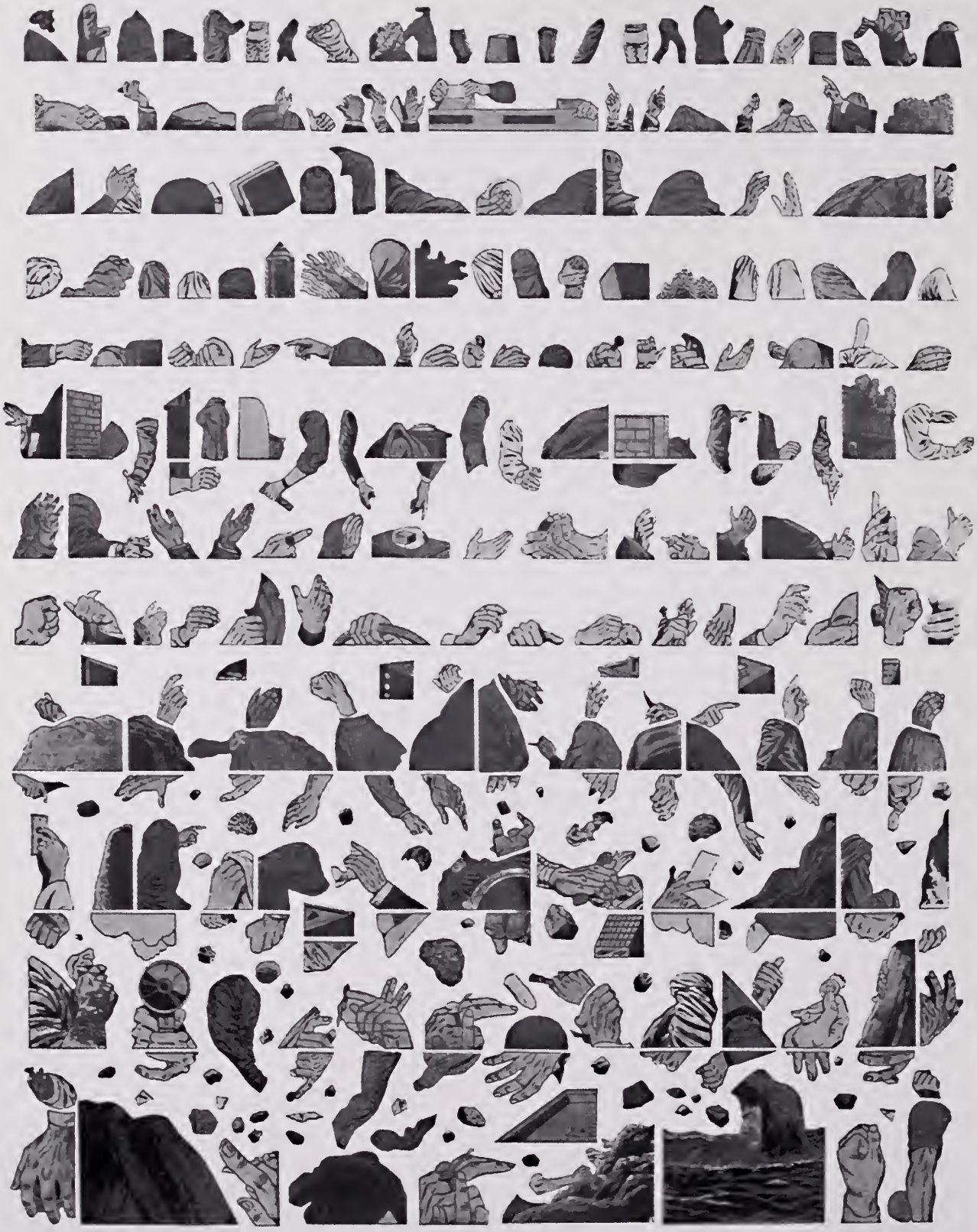

CYNTHIA ROZNOY

fantastic figuration

The works in "Chicago Loop" chronicle the development of a new sensibility that emerged in Chicago following World War II, when artists rejected the prewar interest in social commentary and turned inward to a more intuitive exploration of the psyche. The human figure played a central role in this art, which embraced aspects of Surrealism as well as German Expressionism. Chicago art critic Franz Schulze coined the term "Imagism" to describe this work, and it has now become a blanket label for figurative art produced in Chicago after 1945.

One of the remarkable things about this art was its independence from the New York art scene, where, by the mid-1950s, abstraction was the dominant style. Although both New York and Chicago artists valued emotion and psychic openness in their art, in Chicago the vehicle for this expressiveness was the figure favored for its potential as a universal metaphor.

As critic Dennis Adrian has pointed out, Chicago Imagism is not a unified style, but one of "shared attitude, concern, expressive intention, and emotional climate with some broad commonalties of form."[1] Among these commonalties are a predilection for narrative themes, garish and busy small-scale compositions, high color, fastidious craftsmanship, and an interest in vernacular, irreverent subject matter. This vernacular included imagery from films, comic strips, advertising, catalogues, and girlie magazines. Common and coarse sources also appealed to the Imagists—graffiti, circus banners, penny arcade games, tattoo parlors, striptease joints, and amusement parks. Such a populistic vocabulary might seem at first to align the Imagists with Pop art in New York, especially as it developed in the 1960s. But Pop was slick and impersonal in execution, playing off the look and role of the media in consumer society, whereas Imagism was highly personal, subversive, and rude. For thirty years, these artists—each working in an idiosyncratic style but joined in informal associations so as to gain exhibition opportunities and critical recognition—created a funky reality where fantasy and incongruity cohabit with the banal and sometimes ludicrous aspects of the American scene.

Few Chicago artists in the first half of the twentieth century won national recognition. One of them was Ivan Albright, known primarily for his horrific images of human decay, as in *Self-Portrait*, where he presented himself as a haunted man with a hideous face. Albright influenced a generation of Chicago artists with his peculiar taste for the grotesque and his meticulously rendered character studies.

The predilection for the distorted human figure gathered momentum in Chicago in the early 1950s in the work of Leon Golub, George Cohen, Cosmo Campoli, June Leaf, Irving Petlin, and

Ray Yoshida, *Comic Book Specimen #6*, 1969

Nancy Spero. In 1959, Franz Schulze gave these artists the name "Monster Roster" for their images of dark, mysterious, and fantastical creatures. Their penchant for irrational imagery was inspired by Jean Dubuffet, Alberto Giacometti, and Francis Bacon—as well as by writers such as Franz Kafka, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Nathanael West. The diversity of these sources encouraged stylistic individualism among the Imagists. Campoli's *Birth of Death* speaks to universal themes, yet its *horror vacui* reflects the violence of war. In Golub's *Tomb Figure*, the human form is laid out flat, splayed open, a mutilated body that bears witness to the ravages of the twentieth century. Unlike the ancient archetypes found in Golub's work, the imagery in George Cohen's assemblage *Anybody's Self-Portrait* and June Leaf's collage *Butterfly Lady* seems internally generated.

The artists of the Monster Roster often joined together to facilitate the exhibition of their work. The number of art galleries increased in postwar Chicago, but these galleries supported established artists, primarily abstractionists and prewar expressionists; the new figuration was not promoted. While a few galleries, notably Allan Frumkin and Richard Feigen offered some hope for exhibition venues, the Monster Roster artists lacked success in finding widespread support. By the 1960s, these artists had gone their separate ways, each seeking personal rather than communal success and wanting to put the monster label behind them. They also wanted to test their figurative art in a wider arena. Nancy Spero's *Homage to New York (I Do Not Challenge)* of the late 1950s is an ironic piece that angrily challenges the authority of Abstract Expressionism, then at its glory in New York.

The imagery of Irving Petlin and Ellen Lanyon is dreamier and more classical than Monster Roster art. Petlin's pastel *Hundred Fighting Men*, one of a series, echoes the battle scenes of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Renaissance art—those of Antonio Pollaiuolo, Andrea Mantegna, Leonardo, and Michelangelo. During his travels through Italy in the early 1960s, Petlin was taken by the works of the great masters, but the direct inspiration for *Hundred Fighting Men* was his experience in Algeria in 1961. During a street demonstration against French policy, he saw seven people clubbed to death by the French police. Ellen Lanyon was drawn to the Surrealism of René Magritte and the miniaturized worlds of Joseph Cornell's boxes. Tightly drawn, linear, and precise, *The Housekeeper's Terror* and its companion piece, *One Way to Quarter a Pear*, fancifully juxtapose elements—often hands that manipulate or control—to express facets of the human condition. Two hands in *One Way to Quarter a Pear* wield knives and a third carries an open flame. The enigmatic, disjunctive combination of tools, fruit, chair, goblet, and hands is essential to the narrative. But, even when abetted by suggestive titles, the narrative is only completed by the viewer's interpretation.

Kafkaesque, pessimistic themes mark the work of

Seymour Rosofsky. *The Family*, an intricately composed lithograph, upsets the normal expectations of domestic life with a nightmarish setting and grotesque mechanical characters. When this print was made, Rosofsky's marriage had begun to deteriorate, and that failure is hinted at here and in other works from that period. In *The Family*, the pictorial space is a stage set where the people are performers and their interchange is role-playing. The incongruity between the public roles that husband and wife play and the true, private passions behind them are given ironic play here.

Much of H.C. Westermann's imagery related directly to the postwar anxiety and alienation of the Cold War era. His experiences in both World War II and the Korean War also provided content. The black tramp freighter seen in the background of *The Sweetest Flower* was a common motif in Westermann's art. The ship was an emblem of war-time tragedy that was inspired when he witnessed the devastating and gruesome effects of a kamikaze attack on a U.S. carrier. Westermann's enigmatic constructions, began after he graduated from the School of The Art Institute of Chicago in 1954, often took the form of buildings and humanoids. Some hybrids, like *The Evil New War God*, were part man and part architecture. Made of metal, with chrome over bronze, *The Evil New War God* critiques war and United States foreign policy. The god's sleek metal body with its death-mask head suggests military missiles and warheads.

Construction and assemblage also appeal to Don Baum, who uses found objects in his mixed-media sculptures such as *The Shovel*, an otherworldly relief composition. Baum was director of Chicago's Hyde Park Art Center, where he organized exhibitions of new and emerging artists. In 1966, he presented the first exhibition of six recent graduates of the School of The Art Institute of Chicago who took the group name "Hairy Who." Many of these artists had studied with Ray Yoshida at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Yoshida's interest in popular culture significantly influenced the younger generation. His *Comic Book Specimen* series of 1968–69 employed the vernacular in inventive and rigorous interplays of shape and form. One of his students was Barbara Rossi, who made quilts with erotic images in etching and aquatint on stitched nylon ciré, a highly glazed fabric.

James Falconer, Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Suellen Rocca, and Karl Wirsum continued, after the 1966 exhibition at Hyde Park, to exhibit together under the collective banner of the Hairy Who. When asked to explain their name, they commented that "the name and the group sprung fully grown, or in this case, fully hairy."[2] These artists shared an attraction to funky kitsch, comic books, and toys. The irrational imagery of the Monster Roster resonates in their work though their art reflects American popular culture more than psychic experience. Despite individual differences in style, their works are united by a preference for complex forms, high color, and careful finish.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Cosmo Campoli, *Birth of Death*, 1950

Leon Golub, *Tomb Figure*, 1953

Ellen Lanyon, *One Way to Quarter a Pear*, 1968

Visual and verbal punning are keys to Karl Wirsum's work. The

strategically placed tufts of fur in *Hairy Armpits* make for a humorous joke. Anthropomorphic imagery appeals to Gladys Nilsson. Working in watercolor, Nilsson creates whimsical scenarios, such as *Many Swingers Out-of-Doors*, where fluid and rubbery figures interact in a fantasy world. Jim Nutt's imagery is rough and enigmatic, compulsive and jazzy. In *Cotten Mouth*, the clear, hard-edged stripes moving diagonally across the background and curving across the shoulders of the figure are painted in bright colors. Focused on a large green head, grotesque in its bulging contours and pathological deformation, this painting is typical of the bold and cartoonlike works Nutt exhibited in the Hairy Who group shows of 1966, 1967, and 1968.

Ed Paschke, while not a member of the Hairy Who, shared the group's penchant for bizarre subject matter. Paschke exhibited in 1968 under the banner "The Non-Plussed Some." He challenged the mainstream by injecting perverse imagery of marginal subculture into the painterly language of high culture, often portraying pimps, hookers, and transvestites, all with bizarre sexual ambiguity, as in *His and Hers*.

Roger Brown and Christina Ramberg, among others, exhibited under the name "False Image" at the Hyde Park Art Center in 1968 and 1969. As a group, their work appears more poetic and less strident than that of the Hairy Who, though all shared an interest in popular culture, fantasy, and stylization. Roger Brown's works have a comic book narrative with cartoonlike description and flatness. His anecdotal scenes are filled with fantastic, dramatic details in luminous color, often depicting familiar Chicago landmarks. The Sears and Hancock towers appear in the background of *The Entry of Christ into Chicago in 1976*, and Mayor Richard Daley can be found in the crowd of 380 figures. Belgian artist James Ensor's painting *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889* is the source of Brown's imagery, which plays on the whimsical idea that Christ's coming could occur in one's home town, one's own life.

Christina Ramberg's paintings of figure fragments are more fanciful. In *Istrian River Lady*, we see only a truncated female torso, cinched and wrapped in tight undergarments. The constraint suggests that external forces—fashion and style—define the female. With these garments, Ramberg reveals the culture's ability to fetishize and objectify the feminine form. Voyeuristic glimpses of flesh in this tonal painting of white, black, and gray reference mysterious Yugoslavian rivers that reminded Ramberg of the jet-black hair of Japanese women in Kamajura Period scrolls.

As the artists who had joined together for exhibition opportunities gained independent recognition, their quirkily named groups disbanded. And although each artist was a single-minded individual whose art progressed and changed, each one also played a significant role in the development of the Imagist style, with its enigmatic content, personal imagery, and embrace of vernacular culture.

Seymour Rosofsky, *The Family*, 1968
TOP: Ed Paschke, *His and Hers*, 1977

1. Dennis Adrian, "Critical Reflections on the Development of Chicago Imagism," in Brady Roberts, *Chicago Imagism: A 25 Year Survey*, exh. cat. (Davenport, Iowa: Davenport Museum of Art, 1994), p. 3.

2. *Da Hairy Who*, exh. cat. (Washington D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969), n.p.

works in the exhibition

Dimensions are in inches, followed by centimeters; height precedes width precedes depth.

IVAN ALBRIGHT
(1897–1983)

Self-Portrait at SS East Division Street, 1947
Lithograph: sheet, 16 7/8 x 13 (42.9 x 33); image, 14 3/16 x 10 1/8 (36 x 25.7)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Sylvan Cole, Jr. 65.29

Self-Portrait, 1948
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 (61 x 50.8)
National Academy of Design, New York

Show Case Doll, 1954
Lithograph: sheet, 20 1/8 x 27 7/8 (51.1 x 70.8); image, 17 3/8 x 25 1/2 (44.1 x 64.8)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of an anonymous donor 73.44

ROBERT BARNES
(b. 1934)

Judith and Holofernes, 1958
Oil on canvas, 72 x 84 (182.9 x 213.4)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Sumner Foundation Purchase Award 61.48

DON BAUM
(b. 1922)

The Abandoned Head, 1962
Oil and enamel on canvas, 50 x 40 (127 x 101.6)
Collection of Sarah Livermore

The Shovel, 1963
Found objects: shovel, scythe, and wood, 25 x 15 x 12 (63.5 x 38.1 x 30.5)
Collection of Sarah Livermore

ROGER BROWN
(1941–1997)

Fishing Expedition Chair, 1975
Steel, wood, textile, and acrylic, 30 x 14 1/2 x 13 (76.2 x 36.8 x 33)
Ball State University Museum of Art, Muncie, Indiana; Friends Fund purchase

The Entry of Christ into Chicago in 1976, 1976
Oil on canvas, 72 x 120 (182.9 x 304.8)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Edwin A. Bergman and the National Endowment for the Arts, and Joel and Anne Ehrenkranz, by exchange 77.56

COSMO CAMPOLI
(1922–1996)

Birth of Death, 1950
Bronze, rock, wax, and steel, 70 x 18 3/4 x 24 1/2 (177.8 x 47.6 x 62.2)
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Gift of Joseph and Jory Shapiro

Jonah and the Whale, 1954
Lead, 53 x 9 x 16 (134.6 x 22.9 x 40.6)
Collection of Leon Golub and Nancy Spero

SARAH CANRIGHT
(b. 1941)

Heavy Drama, 1968
Oil on canvas, 34 x 28 (86.4 x 71.1)
Collection of the artist

Illusion, 1969
Oil on canvas, 34 x 28 (86.4 x 71.1)
Collection of the artist

Whisper, 1969
Oil on canvas, 34 x 28 (86.4 x 71.1)
Collection of the artist

GEORGE COHEN
(b. 1919)

Untitled, 1949
Iron and cloth, 17 1/2 x 9 x 7 (44.5 x 22.9 x 17.8)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of Richard L. Feigen

Anybody's Self-Portrait, 1961
Assemblage: framed square mirror mounted on composition board with two oval mirrors, plastic doll's torso, legs, and arms, painted doll's eyes with fiber lashes in tin anchovy can, small metal hand, nail heads, screw eyes, hooks, string, and cloth, 10 1/4 x 9 5/8 x 1 5/16 (26 x 24.4 x 3.4)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund

JAMES FALCONER
(b. 1943)

Untitled, 1968
Acrylic on linoleum, 26 1/2 x 23 3/4 (67.3 x 60.3)
Collection of Ruth P. Horwich

EDWARD C. FLOOD
(1944–1985)

Kick Me, 1968
Acrylic, plexiglass, wood, and reproductions, 12 7/8 x 12 7/8 x 1 3/4 (32.7 x 32.7 x 4.4)
Estate of the artist

Zulu Darts, 1968
Acrylic, paint, wood, and marbles, 13 x 13 x 2 1/4 (33 x 33 x 5.7)
Estate of the artist

Gates of Paradise, 1970
Acrylic, plexiglass, and wood, 29 1/2 x 24 1/2 x 3 (75 x 62.2 x 7.6)
Estate of the artist

South Pacific, 1971
Acrylic, plexiglass, and wood, 25 1/2 x 35 1/2 (64.8 x 90.2)
Estate of the artist

Chovy, 1982
Acrylic on wood, 25 x 22 x 24 (63.5 x 55.9 x 61)
Estate of the artist

LEON GOLUB
(b. 1922)

Birdman, 1953
Lacquer on canvas, 40 x 30 (101.6 x 76.2)
Collection of the artist; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Tomb Figure, 1953
Lacquer, excelsior, and plaster on board, 39 x 20 (99.1 x 50.8)
Collection of the artist; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Head (XIII), 1958
Lacquer and oil on canvas, 32 x 24 (81.3 x 61)
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Gift of Joseph and Jory Shapiro

ART GREEN
(b. 1941)

Station Time, c. 1965
Acrylic on canvas, 66 3/4 x 61 1/4 (169.5 x 155.6)
Collection of Ruth P. Horwich

PHILIP HANSON
(b. 1943)

Rousseau's Lily, 1972
Acrylic on board, 28 1/4 x 27 (71.7 x 68.6)
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Gift of Albert J. Bildner

ELLEN LANYON
(b. 1926)

Maude, 1960
Oil on canvas, 72 x 48 (182.9 x 121.9)
Collection of the artist

The Housekeeper's Terror, 1968
Acrylic and silver dust on canvas, 40 x 40 (101.6 x 101.6)
Collection of the artist; courtesy Jean Albano Gallery, Chicago

One Way to Quarter a Pear, 1968
Acrylic and silver dust on canvas, 40 x 40 (101.6 x 101.6)
Collection of the artist; courtesy Jean Albano Gallery, Chicago

Toad, 1972
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 (121.9 x 91.4)
Collection of the artist

JUNE LEAF
(b. 1929)

Butterfly Lady, 1949
Paper collage and charcoal on paper, 23 1/2 x 17 1/2 (59.7 x 44.5)
Collection of Joel Press

White Torso, 1953
Gouache on paper, 23 x 19 (58.4 x 48.3)
Collection of Joel Press

The Head, 1979
Brass wire, rods, and gears, 11 x 13 1/4 x 10 1/2 (27.9 x 33.7 x 26.7)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 98.27

GLADYS NILSSON
(b. 1940)

Many Swingers Out-of-Doors, 1966
Watercolor on paper, 24 1/4 x 19 1/4 (61.6 x 48.9)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund 67.36

E.Z. Runner, 1985
Watercolor on paper, 40 1/2 x 59 7/8 (102.9 x 152.1)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee and an anonymous donor 85.24

JIM NUTT
(b. 1938)

She's Hit, 1967
Synthetic polymer on plexiglass and enamel on wood, 36 x 24 (91.4 x 61)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund 69.101

Cotten Mouth, 1967–68
Acrylic on plexiglass and enamel on wood and metal, 39 1/2 x 27 1/4 (100.3 x 69.2)
Collection of the artist

Toot Toot, Woo Woo, 1970
Acrylic on plexiglass and wood, 46 1/2 x 30 (118.1 x 76.2)
Elmhurst College, Illinois

Hi—I'm So Happy (If a Bit Silly), 1981
Colored pencil on paper, 10 7/8 x 16 (27.6 x 40.6)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Philip Morris Incorporated 81.15

ED PASCHKE
(b. 1939)

His and Hers, 1977
Graphite, colored ink, and colored pencil on paper, 29 x 23 1/8 (73.7 x 58.7)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee 84.46

Violencia, 1980
Oil on canvas, 74 x 96 (188 x 243.8)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Sherry and Alan Koppel in memory of Miriam and Herbert Koppel 82.46

IRVING PETLIN
(b. 1934)

Hundred Fighting Men, 1962
Pastel on paper, 34 x 24 (86.4 x 61)
Collection of the artist

CHRISTINA RAMBERG
(1946–1995)

Sore Head, 1969
Acrylic, wood, and glass, 7 x 8 x 1 3/4 (17.8 x 20.3 x 4.4)
Collection of Anstiss and Ronald Krueck

Glamour Guide, 1973
Acrylic on masonite, 25 x 23 (63.5 x 58.4)
Collection of Anstiss and Ronald Krueck

Istrian River Lady, 1974
Synthetic polymer on board, 34 1/2 x 30 (87.6 x 76.2)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Frederic M. Roberts in memory of their son, James Reed Roberts 74.12

SUELLEN ROCCA
(b. 1943)

Game, 1966–67
Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 (61 x 61)
Collection of Michele and Malkah Feder-Nadoff

Suellen's Corness Painting, 1967
Oil on canvas, 73 x 59 (185.4 x 150)
Collection of Dennis Adrian

SEYMOUR ROSOFSKY
(1924–1981)

The Family, 1968
Lithograph, 48 1/2 x 33 1/2 (123.2 x 85.1)
Estate of the artist; courtesy Thomas McCormick Gallery, Chicago

Vacationer, 1973
Oil on canvas, 56 1/4 x 48 (142.9 x 121.9)
Collection of Irving Petlin

House Cake, 1975
Lithograph, 28 x 20 3/4 (71.1 x 52.7)
Estate of the artist; courtesy Thomas McCormick Gallery, Chicago

BARBARA ROSSI
(b. 1940)

Comforter, 1970
Etching and aquatint on stitched nylon ciré, 85 3/4 x 60 1/4 (217.8 x 153)
Collection of the artist

NANCY SPERO
(b. 1926)

At Their Word (The Sick Woman), 1957–58
Oil on canvas, 63 x 40 1/2 (160 x 102.9)
Collection of the artist; courtesy P.P.O.W. and Jack Tilton Gallery, New York

Homage to New York (I Do Not Challenge), 1958
Oil on canvas, 47 x 31 (119.4 x 78.7)
Collection of the artist; courtesy P.P.O.W. and Jack Tilton Gallery, New York

H.C. WESTERMANN
(1922–1981)

The Evil New War God, 1958
Brass, partly chrome-plated, 16 3/4 x 9 3/4 x 10 1/4 (42.5 x 24.8 x 26)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Jean and Howard Lipman 97.113.10

Untitled (Oil Can), 1962
Wood, rope, and galvanized metal, 22 1/4 x 10 x 10 (56.5 x 25.4 x 25.4)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Charles Cowles 70.70

Untitled, 1973
Wood, sardine cans, and chain, 12 x 22 1/2 x 12 (30.5 x 57.2 x 30.5)
Estate of the artist; courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, New York

The Sweetest Flower, 1978
Watercolor on paper, 22 1/8 x 31 (56.2 x 78.7)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from The Lauder Foundation—Drawing Fund 78.102

KARL WIRSUM
(b. 1939)

Hairy Armpits, 1963
Oil and fur on canvas, 29 x 27 (73.7 x 68.6)
Collection of Lawrence and Evelyn Aronson

Doggerel II, 1966
Oil on canvas, 33 x 25 (83.8 x 63.5)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund 67.38

Karl Wirsum Wearing Teacher's T-Shirt Hung in Effigy, 1968
Papier-mâché, acrylic, rubberized string, and plastic rope, 16 x 5 1/2 x 4 (40.6 x 14 x 10.2)
Collection of Jim Nutt

RAY YOSHIDA
(b. 1930)

Comic Book Specimen #6, 1969
Collage on paper, 24 x 19 (61 x 48.3)
Collection of Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt

Untitled, 1971
Ink on paper, 18 3/4 x 23 3/4 (47.6 x 60.3)
Roosevelt University, Chicago

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COVER: Gladys Nilsson, *Many Swingers Out-of-Doors*, 1966

Special thanks are extended to Deborah Edwards for her curatorial assistance.

Roger Brown, *The Entry of Christ into Chicago in 1976*, 1976